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TAGS: PREL SP
SUBJECT: FM MORATINOS ON SYRIA, VENEZUELA, MAGHREB

REF: A. ZUNIGA - EUR/WE E-MAIL OF MARCH 2

1B. 2006

Classified By: DCM Bob Manzanares; reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary. The Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos on March 2 for discussion of Venezuela's bid for a UNSC seat, developments in Iran and Syria, Spain's reported plans to sell arms to Libya, and Spain's desire for deeper USG engagement in North Africa. Moratinos indicated Spain would vote for Guatemala in the UNSC election; post is assessing whether this can be translated into active Spanish support for Guatemala's candidacy. Moratinos told the Ambassador that he planned to travel to Damascus in April in "one last effort" to pull Syria out of Iran's orbit and indicated that he had advised France of his plans. Moratinos expressed surprise at Minister of Defense Jose Bono's announcement in Tripoli earlier in the week of plans for 750 million euros in Spanish defense contracts with Libya, including the refurbishment of four Chinook helicopters. The Ambassador warned that Libya was still on the U.S. list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, placing strong restrictions on the transfer of U.S. components to that country. On North Africa, Moratinos said he understood the USG's reluctance to take on another major project, but said he hoped the U.S. would join other interested parties in talks on how to move the parties beyond their current impasse. End Summary.

//VENEZUELA VS. GUATEMALA//

12. (C) Moratinos, who was scheduled to testify later during the day before the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Commission, told the Ambassador that he would use that testimony to express strong support for the Venezuelan NGO Sumate and indicate that Spain and the USG were working closely together in Latin America. (COMMENT: During his testimony, Moratinos mentioned the presence of Spanish diplomats at the Sumate trial and the Spanish government's frequent consultations and pursuit of complementarity with the USG on Latin America, though Spanish media focused on his comments underlining continued Spanish government support for the sale of Spanish ships and aircraft to the Chavez government. END COMMENT).

13. (C) The Ambassador raised the USG's concerns regarding Venezuela's use of oil diplomacy in its bid to win a non-permanent UNSC seat, a troubling development given

Venezuela's irresponsible behavior at the international level. Moratinos said Spain will vote for Guatemala in the election. He described Venezuela as a "disaster" at the international level and recounted a recent incident in Buenos Aires, where the Venezuelan Ambassador walked out of a Moratinos meeting with regional Ambassadors to protest Moratinos' criticism of Iran. (COMMENT: We were able to reconfirm that Spain will vote for Guatemala for the UNSC seat, though our discussions with MFA contacts revealed reluctance to actively promote Guatemala's candidacy, both because Guatemala has not requested such support and because of Madrid's desire to avoid appearing to openly support one Latin American candidate over another. END COMMENT).

Further on Venezuela, Moratinos said it was certain that Chavez would win the next election, but ventured that Chavez might take advantage of his consolidation of power to de-escalate his pursuit of conflict with the USG. The Ambassador noted that since Chavez had made anti-Americanism the central tenet of his regime and had sought to rupture most avenues of bilateral cooperation with the U.S., the USG found it highly unlikely that he would change direction after he had further centralized power in his hands.

//MORATINOS PLANS TRAVEL TO SYRIA//

¶ 14. (C) Moratinos spoke at length on Iran, which he described as the greatest challenge to the safety and security of the free world. Shifting to Syria, Moratinos expressed his conviction that it was worth "making one last effort to pull Syria out of Iran's orbit." To that end, Moratinos said he intends to visit Damascus some time in April to investigate what it might take to get Syria to turn away from Iran. Moratinos told the Ambassador that he had briefed the French on his intention to visit Syria (implying that France had accepted his plans) and said he wanted the USG to know as early as possible.

¶ 15. (C) Moratinos said the situation in Syria was "very complex," but that the return to Damascus of the Syrian Ambassador to Washington as Foreign Minister and the return of the Syrian Ambassador to Madrid as Minister of Communication boded well since the West could "work with both of them." Without providing specifics, Moratinos said that a high-ranking member of the Syrian leadership had raised with him the possibility of Damascus recognizing Israel as a sign of responsible intentions. The Ambassador reviewed the USG's long list of concerns regarding Syria and offered to relay to Moratinos the USG's views on his intentions once the Embassy had discussed the issue with the Department.

//SPANISH ARMS SALE TO LIBYA//

¶ 16. (C) The Ambassador expressed concern regarding MOD Bono's recent announcement in Tripoli of 750 million euros in Spanish weapons contracts with Libya, particularly in light of reports that the deal would include the refurbishment of four Chinook helicopters. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. had already turned off plans by Italy to upgrade those helicopters and was generally troubled by such a large weapons sale to a country that was still on the U.S. list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. Moratinos said he had been taken by surprise by MOD Bono's announcement of a proposed sale and said the MFA did not agree with the sale of weapons to Libya. Moratinos (protect) offered a candid assessment of Bono's propensity for acting independently of the MFA, and sometimes the government.

//NORTH AFRICA//

¶ 17. (C) Moratinos said he understood that the USG had "enough problems on its plate" and was reluctant to add another issue, but asserted that tensions are increasing between Algeria and Morocco, making it imperative for interested parties in the international community to join forces now to push the sides to make progress on the Western Sahara issue. He made a pitch for Spanish, French, USG and UK representatives to meet to see how pressure might be brought to bear to push parties in the right direction. Moratinos

suggested that Spanish plans might include invitations to NEA A/S Welch or PDAS Cheney to visit to discuss this and broader issues. (COMMENT: We understand that the Spanish Embassy relayed to the Department a March 3 message from MFA DG for the Middle East and North Africa Alvaro Iranzo inviting U.S., French, and UK representatives to Madrid for Western Sahara discussions. We would see the value of such discussions if they were expanded to a discussion of security and counterterrorism cooperation in the Maghreb, with the Western Sahara issue as a subset of the broader discussions. END COMMENT).

AGUIRRE